

USDA Service Center News

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U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Food and Agriculture Council

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USDA, State and County Agencies, Local Volunteers Promote Prairie Plantings

The 15th sign-up for the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in March 1997 was the first to implement major changes in the environmental focus of the program. It demonstrated how environmental benefits would factor into bids for land accepted into the program. In Wisconsin, native grass conservation and prairie restoration were focused on as sign-up goals.

This was an important mission for the CRP because of the benefits that native grass restoration offers, protecting native grasses from extinction and providing insect habitat. The native grass and prairie focus helps re-establish and enhance versatility and variety to the land.

In Eau Claire County and west central Wisconsin, the applications evaluated by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service addressed four conservation-related elements: wildlife habitat, water quality, erosion reduction, and long-term benefits. Competition during the sign-up was so intense the possibilities of acceptance were heavily weighed on the landowner's bid price and the wildlife cover they were willing to establish. At the end of the sign-up Eau Claire County was awarded 1800 acres of land for native grass restoration.

Landowners in Eau Claire were up to the challenge of planting all of the acres awarded, but two obstacles needed to be overcome. First there was a major seed shortage and, second, the seeds were extremely expensive. With the help of local conservation agencies and representatives of NRCS, Farm Service Agency, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources offices in six counties, a list of the materials and techniques needed was developed.



Mark Grabarczyk, County Conservation Technician, and Jeff Johnson, Farm Service Agency District Director, weigh and bag bulk seed in a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources storage building.

Apart from the shortage and price of the seeds, the proper tools for planting prairie grasses and other native plants was not available.

In Eau Claire, a biologist from the DNR, local sports groups, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gathered enough funds to purchase two no-till drills. Subsequently an interagency meeting recommended aerial seeding to assist the planting process, a new technique. While approval for this was tough, the recommendations by the Wisconsin DNR and farm co-ops were accepted statewide.

The high demand and low supply of prairie plants caused the prices of the seeds to rise, presenting the second obstacle in the restoration project. To address this difficulty, a private lands specialist with the Wisconsin DNR dramatically reduced the cost of seeds by purchasing the seed in bulk, and making delivery to the NRCS office for distribution, rather than shipping to each landowner. The total cost for a mixture of eight seed varieties ordered in bulk came out to \$60.00, compared to \$120.00 per acre if ordered normally.

Over three tons of seed were sorted and distributed to the private landowners, by volunteers from the FSA, NRCS, Rural Development, Wisconsin Conservation Corps, Wisconsin DNR, the Eau Claire Land Conservation Division, 15 University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire students, as well as private landowners.

The seed packages were ready for pick up in mid April of 1998, and the seeding began during the first week of May. Using specially designed no-till grain drills, aerial seeding, and hand seeding, the task was completed by mid June. Prairie maintenance was provided by NRCS, volunteers from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Biology Department, and the Wisconsin Conservation Corps, and included controlled burning, a necessary practice for the success of the prairies.

Over all the project involved over 100 people from four different USDA agencies, two state agencies, two county agencies, three support groups, the private sector, university students, and an assortment of other volunteers.

Message from the Chair

USDA's Service Center staff will see new computer equipment arrive in the very near future—if the equipment has not already come to your office by the time you read this. Training on the new systems is underway and will continue after the arrival of the new machines.

We are doing things a bit differently these days. Instead of the three agencies getting three (or more) different kinds of equipment, software, operating systems, and accessories, everybody's getting the same basic computer system, and the same basic configuration. Instead of dozens of different systems and configurations that can not work together, everybody will be on a system that is compatible with the one on the next desk. More importantly, each of the three agencies in the Service Centers will have the same capacity to connect to the Internet, share e-mail, run programs from any of the machines, and share data and information. These machines are the first installment towards making that happen.

Likewise, the basic training needed to use these new computers will be the same for everyone—

coordinated by the information technology folks in each state from all of the three agencies working together. The Rural Development specialist and the Natural Resources Conservation Service technician will have the same basic training as will the Farm Service Agency program staff.

The basic programs that will run on these machines now and in the future will be shared across agency lines. The Combined Administrative Management System that is currently in the pilot stage of development as well as the eventual use of People Soft software will allow all three agencies to do personnel work in the same computer environment, with the same software, and at the same time get the results that all our employees want and need. Other programs that are in development and that will be coming to you soon for these new computers include such items as a shared customer information management system and a common land unit system.

The budget has pushed staffing levels down while the workload has changed, and in some cases increased. We continue year-after-year to do more with less—more work and fewer resources. This has put an ever

greater strain on employees, and can not help but have an effect on the service our customers have come to expect from us.

New technology will help. New ways of doing business will help as well. By maximizing our resources, working with greater efficiency and with the tools technology can provide us, we will continue the USDA tradition of quality customer service. At the same time, we will best serve the American taxpayer by getting the biggest return for each dollar we dedicate to our work in rural America.

A key part of our job is to continue providing our employees at USDA with the tools to make this happen. The new computers, software, and training provide a preview of how we are going to approach the future. You are doing a great job of serving our customers; and, we know that you will put these new tools to good use in continuing that tradition in different ways.

Inga Smulkstys
Chair
National Food and
Agriculture Council



Pat Thompson, Farm Service Agency, and Melody Dickinson, Natural Resources Conservation Service, set up new desktop computers with color monitors in the training room of the Ohio Farm Service Agency State Office. Ohio staff developed a working knowledge of the new systems, and will then share the information in training other staff in the state and county offices of the Service Center agencies. Each state developed a coordinated deployment plan that relies on the combined information technology and training resources of the three county based agencies; Rural Development, Farm Service Agency, and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

CAMS Goes Live

The Combined Administrative Management (CAMS) pilot went live on April 27, 1999, with Farm Service Administrator Keith Kelly clicking an icon to process the first personnel action completed with the new system. With a single stroke, Kelly completed a change in work schedule for a Rural Development employee. CAMS and the new common computing environment will make it possible for USDA Service Center Agencies human resources employees from any of the three partner agencies to process personnel actions for any other partner agency within a state.

The human resources staffs in the five pilot states are now regularly processing personnel actions for Rural Development, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Farm Service Agency employees including career appointments, career-conditional appointments, conversion to career status, term appointments, transfers, reassignments, promotions, retirements, resignations, terminations, conversion to excepted appointments, position changes, extensions of

appointments, name changes, duty station changes, FEGLI changes, and other personnel actions. More than 77 different personnel actions are up and running on the new system in the pilot states.

The new system makes processing paperwork smoother and easier for state personnelists. To process a SF-52, Request for Personnel Action, the human resources staff need only fill out a minimal amount of data on the computer screen, and the computer pulls all of the remaining necessary information from the position information file and completes the form. The personnelist then only needs to click on a single button to print the finished form.

CAMS was designed, tested, and piloted by the Service Center Agencies in a partnership with PeopleSoft(c), UNISYS, the National Information Technology Center, and the USDA National Finance Center. The partnership was able to make use of current technology and best business practices to save substantial time and money in producing a Y2K compliant system. Development of the system took less than one year.



Dwight Holman, Deputy Chief, Management, NRCS, and Diane Jenkins, Special Assistant to the Deputy Administrator, Operations and Management, Rural Development, look on as Keith Kelly, Administrator, Farm Service Agency, clicks the button to transmit the first live human resources action to USDA's National Finance Center.

LAN/WAN/Voice Moves from Project to Operation

LAN/WAN/Voice, the USDA's \$130 million project, has provided a common telecommunications infrastructure to over 2,300 USDA field offices. The USDA Service Center Implementation Team integrated 85% of its service centers into a nationwide communications network. Full integration will be completed by the end of this year.

This exceptional performance marks the end of the "project" phase of the LAN/WAN/Voice Project and the beginning of the operational phase under the Support Services Bureau. The Farm Service Agency agreed to take over the LWV Project and move it into operations under the SSB, and is spearheading the transition effort and providing the staff necessary to take over LWV's numerous processes and responsibilities. At the same time, LWV has been working hand in hand with FSA personnel who are both taking over the project and recreating themselves as part of the new Support Services Bureau.

A prime indicator of the success of the transition has been the uninterrupted pace of field office installations and the quick involvement of FSA personnel in pressing network issues. Even with several rapid changes in LWV management, there has been no adverse impact on the ongoing operations. The success of the LAN/WAN/Voice Project and the transition to network operations is also due to the unprecedented levels of inter-agency cooperation.

Several issues critical to all agencies remain to be dealt with in the future. First is the continuing preparation and vigilance for Y2K readiness. Also, network management will become critical as the network faces an onslaught of agency

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North Dakota USDA Service Center Outreach

Service Center Agencies in North Dakota will hold a series of communications workshops for USDA field staff to support program delivery to four American Indian nations in the State. North Dakota's Outreach Working Group, with members from each USDA county based agency, scheduled the workshops after outreach meetings with two Indian nations highlighted the complex and unique communications and program issues associated with USDA's tribal customers.

"We have learned that in order for outreach to be successful in Indian country, communications is of the highest priority," said Todd Hagel, American Indian Liaison for NRCS in the North Dakota state office. "Communications begin first by recognizing the tribes on a nation-to-nation basis."

At recent meetings of the Outreach Council, held on the Standing Rock and Fort Berthold reservations in past months, the tribes discussed the important role of tribal government as USDA provides services to individual landowners on tribal lands. "The challenge for Service Center staff is to conduct nation-to-nation communications with four Indian nations in North Dakota," Hagel said. "Each has a distinct governmental structure, unique land conditions and natural resource challenges, and different economic base."

The Outreach Council meetings, held jointly with tribal leaders and local cooperators, provided customers with the opportunity to make recommendations about USDA's outreach efforts. In addition to comments about tribal sovereignty, the Outreach Council received input on program delivery on American Indian reservations.

Tribal land users at Standing Rock reservation suggested to the Outreach Council that local Service Center staff be more involved with the tribes, rather than the state service centers leading outreach efforts. Participants at the meeting suggested that the formation of local, not State, outreach working groups is the key to program

delivery on tribal lands. The Council followed the suggestions and directed the Outreach Working Group to form outreach groups at the local level.

Tribal leaders said that USDA's field structure, based on state and county boundaries, may be too inflexible for some tribal customers. Members of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, whose reservation lies in both North and South Dakota, have requested that USDA officials in the states work cooperatively to maintain a single Service Center for the reservation, rather than one in each state.

North Dakota's reservations are home to three affiliated tribes (the Mandan, the Hidatsa, and the Arikara) on the Fort Berthold reservation, the Standing Rock and Spirit Lake Sioux Tribes, and the Turtle Mountain Band of the Chippewa.

The communications workshops for field staff will emphasize the importance of communicating on a nation-to-nation basis, as well as other cultural, legal, social, economic issues that were raised at the Outreach meetings. Two more Outreach Council meetings are scheduled for later this year on the Spirit Lake and Turtle Mountain Reservations. Two of the educational workshops for field staff have been conducted with the rest scheduled for September.

Comments or suggestions?

Have a newsletter article for submission?

Is there something your USDA Service Center does particularly well?

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business requirements and the resulting procedures—from all three partner agencies—all taking advantage of network technology to serve customers better.

The transition from project to operations was accomplished in a very short amount of time, approximately five months, and officially transitioned to network architecture infrastructure operations on June 29, 1999. Credit for the project and transition success can be attributed to the overwhelming amount of cooperation and involvement from the three partner agencies, and the respective personnel out in the field—clearly a multi-agency USDA effort.

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